

# ELK

in  
Kentucky



"Into the Cumberland" by Rick Hill is the current release from Restoring Our Wildlife Heritage collectors series. The prints and collectors patches are available from the Salato Wildlife Education Center located in Frankfort, Kentucky

## What are Elk?

Elk are members of the deer family. Moose are the largest members of this family followed by elk, caribou, mule deer and white-tailed deer. Elk weigh about 35 pounds at birth. When fully grown, an adult cow elk weighs about 500 pounds and a bull elk weighs about 700 pounds.

Elk reproduction is slow compared to that of whitetails. Most cows are nearly three years old before they breed successfully. And when a cow gives birth, it is generally to one calf -- twins are very rare in elk.

Elk are primarily grazers, with grass a year-round food source. The animals will also browse tree leaves, twigs and shrubs. Because of their height, elk can feed above the deer browse line. Kentucky offers elk a virtual smorgasbord all year long.

## Wild Elk in Kentucky

During the winter of 1997-98, the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR) began a process to fill a long-term absence in Kentucky's ecosystem. At the same time, Kentuckians began to regain a bit of their long lost wildlife heritage. Through an intensive restoration effort wild elk once again roam free over the south-east portion of the Commonwealth.

In 1995, the first elk were brought back to the Bluegrass State. However, these elk are kept in large enclosures. The largest group lives on the Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area in Western Kentucky, while a few animals reside at the KDFWR Salato Wildlife Education Center in Frankfort.

But hundreds of years ago, elk actually roamed freely across Kentucky. The region's salt licks, clean water and abundant vegetation attracted elk, deer and bison in great numbers. The game animals lured Native Americans and colonists. As recently as the early 1700s, elk and bison herds grazed Kentucky's savannah grasslands and rested in her forests.

As more and more people moved into the region, elk, deer and bison found less room to roam. The combination of encroaching civilization, habitat loss and unregulated shooting pushed the animals out. By the mid-1800s, elk and bison had disappeared from Kentucky.

## Returning a Native

In an effort to restore some of Kentucky's natural biodiversity, the KDFWR, with funding from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, is committed to an aggressive program to establish a self-sustaining, free-ranging elk herd in Eastern Kentucky. Up to 200 elk are being released each year for nine years.

Elk require a large area of 200,000 or more contiguous, forested acres. Of course, water is a must and the restoration area has to have some grassland openings. The ideal setting is as far as possible from row crops and development.

Approximately 2.6 million acres of suitable elk habitat contained within 14 counties in the southeastern portion of the state. A 475,000-acre block of land surrounding reclaimed land on the Cyprus-Amax Wildlife Management Area (WMA) near Hazard was the initial (1997-98) release site. (The University of Kentucky's Robinson Forest borders the WMA.)

## Keeping up with Kentucky's Elk

Kentuckians can play an important role in monitoring their own elk. The first elk brought into Kentucky wear radio transmitters and numbered collars to help monitor their movement. Some elk wear Global Positioning System (GPS) collars which track the animals more precisely.

Area residents can help biologists track elk. Using binoculars, anyone who sees an elk can read the numbered collar and contact the KDFWR to report the collar number, date and location of each sighting. Call 1-800-858-1549.

## Sportsmen Play a Role

Elk will eventually add to Kentucky's hunting opportunities. Licensed hunters will keep elk wild. At the same time, limited hunting will help keep elk numbers in check and keep the herd from expanding outside the H-county area. The first chance for elk hunting in Kentucky may occur before the release program ends.

Under the watchcare of Kentuckians, elk will do well. After the herd grows, presenting more viewing opportunity, take a moment or two to watch. You may begin to understand how Daniel Boone felt when he first entered Kentucky and saw a land teeming with wildlife.

Read more about elk at your local library and visit the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's web site at <http://www.rmef.org/index.htm>.



Photos by Laura Lang

Photo by Beth McDonald

## Tips for Viewing Wildlife

Much of the excitement of wildlife viewing stems from the fact that you can never be sure of what you will see. While many species are difficult to view under the best of circumstances, there are several things you can do to greatly increase your chances of seeing wild animals in their natural environment.

Prepare for your outing. Always carry water, even in winter. Dress appropriately for the area, season and day's weather. Weather conditions can change rapidly and may vary markedly from one day to the next, especially in spring and fall.

Visit when animals are active. The first and last hours of daylight are most productive. Many mammals and birds are quite active before or after storms or on cloudy summer days.

Wildlife viewing is often seasonal. Many species are present only during certain times of year. Waterfowl and shorebirds are best viewed when they migrate through Kentucky in large numbers. Bald eagles may be seen only in certain months.

Use field guides. Pocket field guides are essential for positive identification of the many animals.

Use binoculars or a spotting scope. Viewing aids bridge the distance between you and wild animals. Binoculars come in different sizes such as 7x35, 8x40, 10x50. The first number refers to how large the animal will be magnified compared to the naked eye. The second number refers to the diameter of the lens that faces the animal. The larger this number, the greater the amount of light entering the lens- which means better viewing in dim light.

Move slowly and quietly. When you arrive at a viewing site, you can employ several strategies for getting close to wildlife. You can stay in your vehicle and wait for animals to pass by, or you can find a comfortable place, sit down and remain still. Walk into the wind if possible, avoiding brittle sticks or leaves. Use trees and vegetation as a blind. Wear dark-colored clothes or camouflage.

Enjoy wildlife at a distance. You can actually harm the wildlife you care about by getting too close. Move away from an animal if it stops feeding and raises its head sharply, appears nervous, stands up suddenly or changes its direction of travel. Causing animals to run or move in winter forces them to use critical energy reserves needed to survive.

Never touch orphaned or sick animals, especially skunks and raccoons. In Kentucky, skunks and raccoons may carry diseases harmful to humans. Young wild animals that appear to be alone usually have parents waiting nearby.

Some wildlife can be dangerous. Maintain a safe distance from black bears, especially sows with cubs; white-tailed deer bucks and elk bulls in fall and bobcats any time of year.

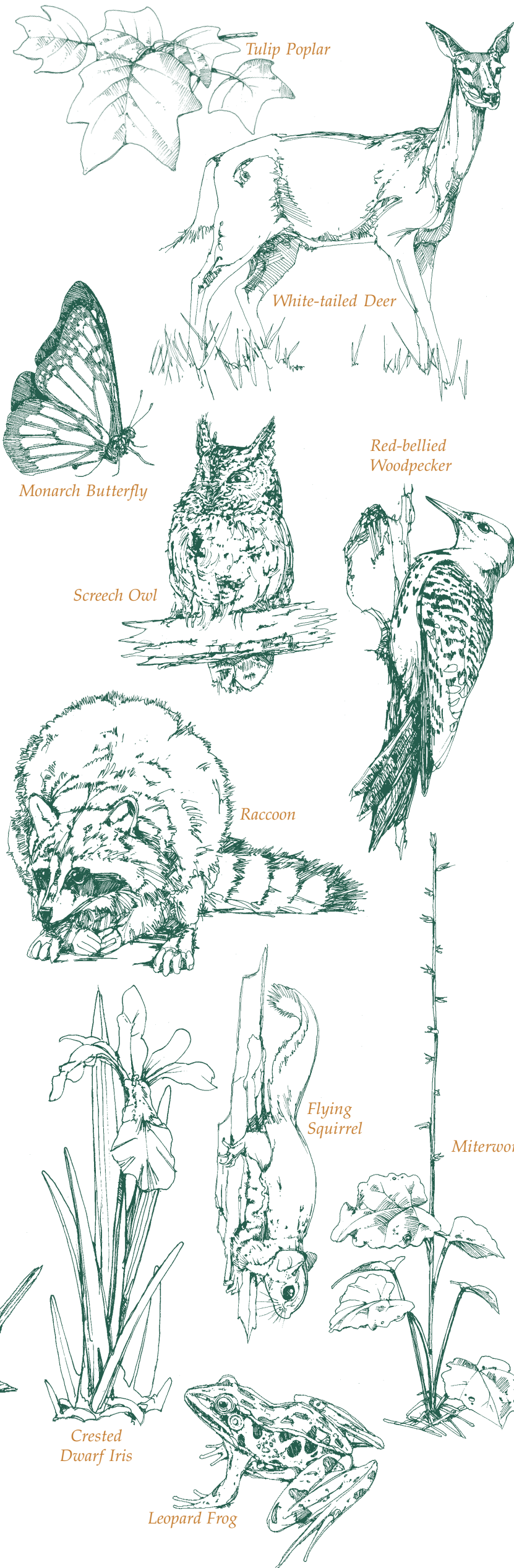
Honor the rights of private landowners. About 95% of Kentucky is privately owned. Always get permission from the landowner before entering private property.

The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources is funded through the sale of hunting and fishing licenses. It receives no general fund tax dollars.

Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources  
#1 Game Farm Road  
Frankfort, Kentucky 40601  
1-800-858-1549 or (502) 564-4336  
[www.state.ky.us/agencies/fw/kdfr.htm](http://www.state.ky.us/agencies/fw/kdfr.htm)

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## Other species found in southeast Kentucky





# ELK in Kentucky

## Appalachian Region: Kentucky's Portion

The Cumberland Plateau and Mountains, also known as the Eastern Coalfields, encompass all or part of 35 counties and cover 10,500 square miles. The area is highly dissected with steep valley walls and narrow, sinuous valleys. Steep slopes of shale and sandstone date back 300 million years. Cliffs of resistant sandstone often cap ridges. Wooded mountain slopes extend to the horizon in all directions.

The mixture of dominant trees in the prevailing cool, moist, mountain environments is the most diverse of Kentucky's communities and ecosystems. The region's mixed mesophytic forest is widely recognized as a center of the biological diversity of the world's deciduous forests.

At least 10 commercially valuable trees can be important canopy species in a mixed mesophytic forest. These are white oak, northern red oak, shagbark hickory, white ash, beech, sugar maple, black walnut, white basswood, yellow buckeye and tulip poplar.

The relative importance of canopy trees shifts with topographic changes such as slope direction, steepness, elevation and differences in land-use history. Most of the forests have been logged and are now in various stages of second and third growth.

The region is also known for its "black gold" with subsurface and surface coal mining practiced many years. (Dr. Thomas Walker was the first to mention mountain coal in 1750.)

Big Black Mountain, at 4,150 feet, represents Kentucky's highest elevation. The region's major rivers are the Big Sandy, Licking, Kentucky and Cumberland.



Photo by Lew Kornman

## Reclamation

Exploration and mining of coal and other minerals finally saw technology bring improved ways to extract resources and "reclaim" the mined land for multi-uses,

often for the advantages of the community. In Kentucky, the top five post-mine land uses are pastureland, cropland/prime farmland, forest land, commercial/industrial and fish and wildlife areas.

The sites where elk are being restored are on re-claimed coal mine areas. The open, rolling areas with water impoundments surrounded by cliffs and hills are prime landscapes for wildlife. The mix of diverse habitats attracts many wildlife species.

The area's wild turkeys, white-tailed deer, waterfowl and migrating songbirds are thriving.

The variety of wildlife-related recreational opportunities such as hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing boost the area's economy. Youth hunts and fishing events are now being offered on the Cyprus-Amax Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Each year, thousands of schoolchildren and other educational groups visit the WMA to learn about environmental technology and reclamation practices.

The WMA also offers opportunities for research projects. The University of Kentucky is conducting many such projects on reclamation sites, including forestry techniques, soil improvements and watershed management.

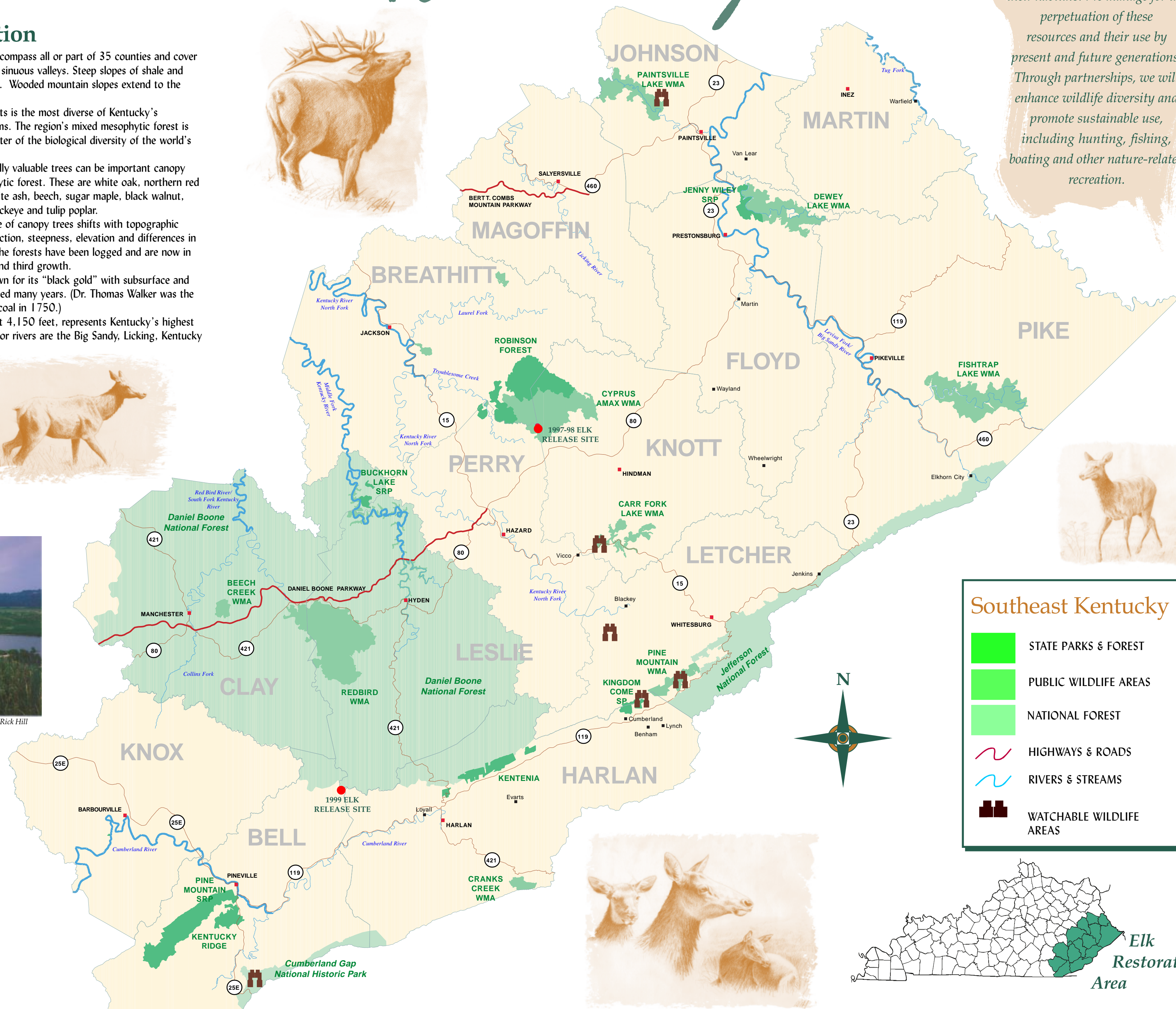


photos by Rick Hill



## KDFWR Mission

We are stewards of Kentucky's fish and wildlife resources and their habitats. We manage for the perpetuation of these resources and their use by present and future generations. Through partnerships, we will enhance wildlife diversity and promote sustainable use, including hunting, fishing, boating and other nature-related recreation.



Elk sketches by Rick Hill

